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ABSTRACT

A review of research on the roles played by the mass media and the political parties during the agenda-setting stage of political activity in the United States indicates that the mass media have assumed some of the informing and issue-initiating functions generally understood to be performed by political parties. It seems desirable to develop an empirically based theoretical model based on an acknowledgement that political parties play a minimal role in informing the public and establishing the issue debate and on a recognition of the substantial role of the media in those areas. Such a model would be based on an understanding that (1) the parties provide a mechanism for determining who the governmental actors will be, and the party label provides an affective cue for the 10% of the public considered political "actives" and for voters; (2) the issue-initiating and informing functions operate largely outside the partisan machinery; (3) political actives use a number of institutions (the mass media being a primary one) to initiate and carry on debate; (4) the mass media provide information that can be used by political actives; (5) candidates and governmental officials seek to disseminate their positions through the media; and (6) information about governmental activity is provided to the public largely by the news media. (Author/GT)

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Q. S.

A COMPARISON OF AGENDA SETTING IN THE UNITED STATES BY THE MASS MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES

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A COMPARISON OF AGENDA SETTING IN THE UNITED STATES
BY THE MASS MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Survey research into how, and how much, the public in a democratic society participates in its own governance has generally indicated that the public as a whole is both unknowledgeable and inactive. The normative implications of these findings have led scholars to take several approaches in attempting to create an empirically based democratic theory that can satisfy the normative constraints imposed by classic democratic theory. None of these approaches has met with broad acceptance.

The difficulties have proved immense. The complexities and interdisciplinary nature of the problem have confounded the most eminent scholars. Obviously, it is far beyond the scope of this paper--and the capabilities of this author--to attempt any substantive additions or amendments to empirical democratic theory, but a review of a broad range of findings by students of political participation and mass communication does seem to lead to a perspective which might provide some worthwhile commentary concerning the inadequacies of several approaches to theory building now being followed.

In their overview of modern democratic theory building, Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder note that classic democratic theory was called into question with the earliest survey research into political activity. The fact that democratic governments continue to exist and that their publics seem reasonably

satisfied, "despite the fact that the average citizen does not and perhaps cannot play the role that classical theorists would have him play, has presented political science with the problem of reconciling democratic theory with reality."[1] The dominant response, they state, has been characterized as "democratic elitism" or "the elitist theory of democracy," which depicts public disinterest and nonparticipation as evidence of soundness of the system and public confidence in its governance.[2] Critics of elitist theory have demonstrated, however, that nonparticipation is not distributed evenly throughout the citizenry, thus questioning a pluralistic democracy's capacity for responsiveness,[3] and that nonparticipation also can be based in a sophisticated cynicism and distrust of politics.[4] Whatever combination of apathy and anome may exist in a given polity, these scholars charge, the result is "stable unrepresentation," a bias in the distribution of influence and of benefits.[5]

At base, the elitist critics of classic theory and the critics of the elitist response both focus on the question of the source of public policy issues and the responsiveness of the policy-creating mechanism, whatever it may be. Cobb and Elder provide a useful distinction here. They state that any polity has both an institutional agenda and a systemic agenda. Legislative calendars, court dockets and State-of-the-Union addresses are examples of institutional agendas, which are "the major focuses of pre-decisional

political processes."[6] The systemic agenda, or set of legitimate political controversies, geneally is more abstract and general and is broader in scope than the institutional agenda. Further, Cobb and Elder hypothesize "that the greater the disparity between the two types of agendas, the greater the intensity and frequency of conflict within the political system" because the institutional agenda is not addressing the controversies of the systemic agenda. The authors see the institutional agendas as being less open to new issues or groups than the systemic agenda, which requires only the relatively benign label of "legitimacy" before accepting new issues or groups, while a society's political institutions are often ill equipped structurally or philosophically to grapple with new issues.

By identifying two types of agenda, Cobb and Elder have provided three helpful avenues for analysis. First, they provide a more discrete focus for the investigation of political activity. Second, they emphasize a broader question of political analysis: the extent to which politics, narrowly defined, is more than a device for determining who the governmental actors will be. Third, they reiterate the concept that involvement in the agenda-setting processes (the systemic agenda) "may be more important to the long-run stability of the system than electoral participation" (the institutional agenda).[8]

In the terminology of the Cobb-Elder model, this paper will

attempt to define the roles of the mass media and the political parties during the systemic agenda stage of political activity in the United States. The conclusions will suggest that systemic agenda-setting is more important to the stability and responsiveness of the American political system than electoral activity and participation and that the mass media have assumed some of the functions generally understood to be those of political parties. The practical and theoretical implications of these very tentative conclusions are somewhat large.

Before outlining the data upon which these conclusions are to be based, the normative position concerning the informed public on which this discussion rests should be made explicit. As Stokes and Miller note, "How much the people know is an important, if somewhat hidden, problem of the normative theory of representation."[9] As related earlier, this question, and its implications, is a point on which empirical, elitist and classical theorists divide. Further, it should be obvious that representative institutions will work quite differently depending upon the type, amount and quality of information the electorate has available to it and utilizes. The normative position here is that increasing the amount and quality of information about politics and government-related issues that is available to the public will, until carried to an extreme, concomittantly increase the ability of the public to participate intelligently and effectively in its governance. The questions of

information costs and of the ability of the public to utilize the information available, although crucial to the wider problem of democratic theory building, are outside the scope of this narrower discussion.

Crucial to an empirical theory of representative democracy is a determination of the nature of political parties, for such groups usually are assigned the role of structuring the political life of the polity. Typical of the most widely recognized definitions are:

> 1. "Structuring the vote is the minimum function," but "it is the party label, not the party association and its leaders, which provides the guide."[10]
>
> 2. "Autonomous organized groups that make nominations and contest elections in the hope of eventually gaining and exercising control of the personnel and policies of government."[11]
>
> 3. "An agency for the organization of political power characterized by exclusively political functions, by a stable nature and inclusive membership, and by the ability to dominate the contesting of elections."[12]
>
> 4. The two "master categories" are "parties-as-instruments" of policy making and "parties-as-symbols" promoting effective responses among the public.[13]
>
> 5. Four general usages: party-in-the-electorate; the more or less professional workers; party-in-the-government; an entity which includes all of those.[14]
>
> 6. Four characteristics distinguish parties from other political groups: a group which generally is identified by a label; some of that group openly act to achieve party goals, whatever they may be; the party members' right to organize is legitimized; the party is "involved with" making nominations, seeking candidate and program support.[15]

The list, by no means exhaustive, is highly instructive, however. In only one case, a minor portion of the last definition, do these examples even suggest that a proper and necesary function of a political party in a democratic society is to inform the public so it can adequately perform its role of legitimizing the government. To continue Cobb and Elder's construct, the public must have labeling-type information in order to efficiently and rationally participate in the electoral process (the institutional agenda). Also, some mechanism or system must exist to facilitate issue initiation and make possible widespread issue awareness and discussion (the systemic agenda); this function has been termed "agenda-setting" in the political activity literature, and that is the definition used in this discussion.

Walter Lippmann's critique of the political scientist's orientation indicated by these definitions remains as valid today as when it was written more than half a century ago:

> The truth about distant or complex matters is not self-evident, and the machinery for assembling information is technical and expensive. Yet political science, and especially democratic political science, has never freed itself from the original assumption of Aristotle's politics sufficiently to restate the premises, so that political thought might come to grips with the problem of how to make the invisible world visible to the citizens of a modern state. So deep is the tradition, that until quite recently, for example, political science was taught in our colleges as if newspapers did not exist.[16]

The indictment is, of course, drawn with too broad a brush; however, it does seem that a substantial percentage of political science

research and analysis has overlooked the all-too-obvious fact that a great deal of the information with which the public judges the governed is provided directly or indirectly by the mass media. If the media were simply a conduit through which passed, without alteration of any sort, information that political actors sought to provide the public, overlooking the dissemination process would be of no matter. However, that is not the case. In his classic commentary, Bernard C. Cohen noted:

> If we do not see a story in the newspapers (or catch it on radio or televison), it effectively has not happened so far as we are concerned. This is to say, then, that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.[17]

The mass media, then, have "served as middleman and broker for important new ideas and policies,"[18] and this active, judgmental role of the press has been the subject of a vast number of books and articles. However, most have been purely anecdotal and methodologically weak;[19] most especially, they do not generally attempt to place their findings in a broader conceptual context. The data collected through survey research also provide information that is less satisfactory than desirable concerning the effects of the news media on the public. Basically, the reasons seem to be that the topic is a methodologically complex and subtle one,[20] comparatively little research has focused on the so-called

"quiescent" times between campaign activity,[21] and some scholars neglect to include questions concerning media effects in their studies.[22]

A further difficulty involved in developing a theory of the comparative effects the media and parties have on the public is that the literature on the two generally is found in separate disciplines, which often differ greatly in approach, methodology and terminology. Because of this, discussion of the effects the two have, or seem to have, on political activity in the United States will be approached separately. Then, some tentative attempts to relate and compare the data will be made. In the literature on the effects of television on voting and on political attentiveness, from the first, the more rigorous studies have found little substantive effect. Yet each succeeding book or article presents that finding as though it were based on new and imaginative readings of recent, more sophisticated data. One of the earliest studies, by Angus Campbell in 1962, found that,

> comparisons of the national elections during the era of television raise serious doubt as to whether this new medium, despite its tremendous audience, has greatly altered the basic relationship of the electorate to its national government. In its first decade, it seems neither to have elevated the general level of political interest nor to have broadened the total range of political information.[23]

Similarly, in one of the more recent studies, John P. Robinson found in 1976 that, while "most voters claim television as the major source

of their political information, this conclusion is not supported when people's media usage is compared directly with their actual political information."[24]

Campbell did find, however, that "the advent of radio was followed by a general and significant increase of turnout in national elections (in 1936); the arrival of television was not."[25] He also noted that voting and expressions of interest in or caring about a presidential election vary together, while neither item has any observable correlation with media activity. Further, he found that public knowledge varies among elections and it, too, seems to have no independent correlation with media activity.[26] In addition, Campbell found that the third or fourth of the public that is generally uninvolved and uninformed is also incurious about politics, that this group does not attune to politics even when the broadcast media remove the necessity of reading to become informed. And he stated the obverse: "If there is one dependable law in the world of mass communications, it is that those most likely to seek information are already the best informed."[27]

More recent scholars have provided sophisticated replications of Campbell's findings, but the basic thrust has not changed:

> Mass communications, including those in a political campaign, are but one set of influences contributing to attitude-change; any message is but one stimulus working amid others in a total situation. Studies of communications effects suggest that the overall impact of accompanying stimuli is to reduce the conversion potential of communications and negotiate a reinforcement effect.[28]

Beyond this, the data correlating information with political activity and feelings of efficacy, contrasting newspaper readers and television viewers, comparing the amount of knowledge to the level of political interest and many other areas of research becomes voluminous.[29] No attempt will be made here to review that literature. Some of the more general findings, however, relate more directly to the subject of this paper.

First, major changes in political attitudes, beliefs or behavior are unlikely to be caused by the mass media "because exposure is highly self-selective; people pay attention primarily to content that already interests them and that is congenial to their point of view."[30] Further, several scholars have found that, "even when people do expose themselves to contrary or unfamiliar points of view, their interpretations of a message are often different from those intended by the sender."[31] In his lucid discussion of this subject, V. O. Key used the concept of "stratification" among the media audience according to interest and involvement in politics. "The greater the sense of political involvement, the greater the exposure to political communications tends to be."[32] In addition,

> The highly and continuously attentive stratum includes relatively large numbers of magazine readers, book readers, and readers of quality newspapers. The same group listens in higher proportion to radio and television programs with a high assay of political content than do other strata. The upper stratum doubtless

> includes most of the political activists, probably no more than 10 per cent of the population at most.[33]

Although some comparatively unsophisticated studies have tended to suggest that the stratum most attentive to the news media is closely correlated to a stratification by occupation, income, or social status, Key and others have found that the stratum more closely parallels differentiations according to political knowledge and activity.[34] The differences identified include "the more exposure to the campaign in the mass media, the more correct their perception of where the candidates stand on the issues,"[35] and "the persons who actually expose themselves most are those who are least likely to shift their voting intentions during a campaign."[36]

Second, major changes in political position are unlikely because these influentials, these communicators, exist in a broad environment that includes many sources of political information and stimulation. "The messages of the media do not strike the isolated and atomistic individual; they strike . . . an individual living in a network of personal relationships that affect his outlook toward the objects of the external world, including the mass media."[37]

Third, the best informed-most exposed-political influential stratum of the public is the group that makes up the "first step" in the "two-step flow" identified by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his

associates.[38] Thus, the media audience is, in effect, enlarged far beyond those persons who actually read the political news or view it on television.

Fourth, this wider audience does not receive the same information the communicators do, for the communicators alter it as they pass it on. Opinion leaders, or communicators,

> translate the mass-media reality into the experience of local groups. Some persons may enjoy informal status as opinion leaders precisely because they attend to the relevant mass-media content. Or it may be that in order to wield influence a man may have to be especially knowledgeable about what the mass media do and say. In either case, the opinion leaders exhibit greater responsiveness to the mass media, channeling for their peers . . . that which the mass media have already made significant.[39]

Fifth, those who change their voting intentions or who make up their minds late, and those least interested in the campaign, are more likely to gain their political information from other persons, not from the media.[40]

(It should be noted here that recent laboratory studies tend to indicate that people gain information and alter beliefs after exposure to public affairs television programs.[41] However, the relation of such studies to the real world is slim at best. Subjects either are college students or are chosen to provide a cross-section of the electorate. In fact, these studies tend to discard subjects who have seen the program at question so as to maintain the "integrity" of the sample. Actually, this guarantees that most of the subjects are not typical viewers of public

affairs programs, as the five points above indicate.)

The complexities--and inconsistencies--in the political activity literature make definitive models of the media audience difficult to create, and no attempt will be made here to draw one. However, the general characteristics of the media audience related here should be considered as relevant factors in any discussion of the effect of the news media on political knowledge and activity.

The inclusiveness of these factors, also, has led some scholars to posit a long-term effect of the mass media, one that occurs "gradually and over a period of time, and thus this impact seems less spectacular than the shift or crystallization of a particular vote decision."[42] Although many scholars indicate, as does Robinson, that "there is mounting evidence of media impact on certain attitudes and issues over time,"[43] directly applicable, clearcut data are meager. Obviously, the media provide information throughout the year that could influence knowledge and partisan stability or change. The collection of the vast majority of data, however, is confined to the campaign period. "Examination of change within this short (campaign) span fails altogether to account for the cumulative impact of media exposure which may, over a period of time, lead to such changes in the motivational patterns as differentiate one election from another or to the breaking away of many 'primary' groups from older allegiances."[44]

The other body of literature relevant to this discussion has been largely developed by communications scholars, not political scientists, and many of their recent studies have focused on what is termed, much more narrowly in this discipline, the agenda-setting function of the mass media. (The fact that the two fields utilize the same term for different concepts is a particularly striking indication of the compartmentalization of the research on this subject.)

In their recent review of agenda-setting literature, Tipton, Haney and Basehart conclude the data show that the media should be bexpected to initiate the saliency of political issues -- have the strongest agenda-setting effect -- among "individuals who are the least interested in the campaign. The high interest people may attend to the media more, but they should also have more stable definitions of what the important issues are. Low interest respondents, since they are not as apt to have a solidified view of the campaign, should be more influenced by the 'immediate flow' of changing media emphasis."[45]

Tipton, Haney and Basehart, however, were unable to find convincing evidence of an agenda-setting function among a sample of Lexington, Kentucky, voters in the 1971 mayoral and gubernatorial races. Major difficulties were that media coverage was not strong and that the issues in both races were seen as static and

of little importance. This seems to be a major difficulty in attempts to identify agenda-setting, or issue initiation, by the news media; it is a conceptual problem similar to that earlier identified by students of elections: some are critical, some are not; some have great public salience, some do not. Thus, it seems likely that any substantial influence would be expected primarily during periods surrounding critical elections.

Further complicating this body of literature is the attempt by many scholars to prove causality, a questionable concept in social science research. In fact, this causal model has proved so aluring that the term agenda-setting has been nearly usurped by disciples of this approach.

Also, those studies designed to isolate news-media effects seldom utilize Key's stratification model outlined above. At least partly for this reason, it would seem, agenda-setting research has found little press impact. In fact, if Key's model is accepted, findings of a major agenda-setting role played by the press would be surprising.

An approach more in keeping with the methodology of this discussion is the one taken by Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang, who found that panel studies indicate the news media "identified" and "emphasized" the issues that determined the elections of 1944 (class and socioeconomic issues) and 1952 (communism, corruption and Korea).[46] However -- or whether -- empirical studies have identified an agenda-setting function of the press, the news media's

"ability to define issues or candidates in terms of importance or strength may be the most direct power that the media exert on the electorate or the political process."[47]

This review of the two main, separate bodies of literature concerning the impact of the news media on political activity and information has indicated that the effect is not major, is of long-term and not short-term significance, and is only one of several inputs that affect the politically active stratum of the public.

In order to compare the agenda-setting functions of the news media and of political parties, it is necessary to identify what impacts or effects American political parties have on public activity and information in the political arena.

Of great concern to many political scientists is the widely accepted "trend toward the gradual disappearance of the political party in the United States."[48] Since the turn of the century, political reformers have ousted bosses, shortened ballots and arranged them to discourage straight-ticket voting, instituted non-partisan elections, created local political organizations, replaced patronage with civil service and created governmental welfare programs. Perhaps the major single reform for the purposes of this study was the widespread acceptance of the party primary.[49]

It was noted earlier that the widely accepted definitions of a political party nearly ignore the informing or agenda-setting function absolutely necessary in a democratic polity. Many of the

definitions, however, do indicate that labeling and vote structuring are among the needed party functions. It would seem that both labeling and vote structuring are precursors to the more sophisticated and complex function of agenda-setting. In the Cobb-Elder terminology, labeling relates to the institutional agenda and has no necessary relation to the systemic, issue initiating, agenda. The fact that American parties perform the labeling, institutional, function poorly suggests it is highly unlikely they soon could attempt an informing, systemic, role.

Widespread acceptance of the primary has meant that "American parties, in any organized sense, often cannot even control the bestowal of their own labels. The result of direct primaries may be to label candidates unwanted by party leaders and by whatever there is of an organized membership."[50] Although "responsible party" advocates suggest the closed primary could be compatible with the strong party system they desire,[51] it seems more likely that primary candidates (aiming their appeals to voters) and primary voters (attuned to the claims of the candidates) are largely unconcerned and perhaps disinterested in the party theoretically involved.[52]

Further, in general campaigns as well as primaries, candidates "are often more dependent upon powerful pressure groups than upon the party of which they are nominal members. . . . [Hundreds of major organizations] constitute political forces often more powerful than the parties themselves. And most of them are

better financed."[53]

It is important to note that those members of the public who are the strongest advocates of nonpartisanship are among those identified as the communicators and political actives and, in addition, that nonpartisanship varies among stratifications in the public in the same manner that political activity and information do.

> Nonpartisanship in the United States is not an individualistic anachronism. It is a twentieth-century reaction to previously established parties, and it tends to be strongest in communities which, in social type [the educated middle class], are becoming more rather than less common. . . . Nonpartisanship may be an attempt to take a political step beyond parties, to ask voters even in a mass electorate to choose candidates as individuals or as members of groups more narrowly defined than parties, and to break what are seen as artificial cleavages imposed by parties.[54]

If the breakdown of these "artificial cleavages" were accompanied by some new form of political organization, it could be said that partisan groups and attachments were altering, not declining. However, that is not the case.

> The weakening of state and local organizations has not meant a compensating strengthening of the national party. Rather, the addition of new primaries and other convention reforms is likely to disperse power still further. Moreover, many persons in the American electorate remain unconcerned with policy questions and unaware of party positions.[55]

The likely causes for the decline of American parties are so closely intertwined with the nation's social and political life that it seems unwise to predict a resurgence of partisan vigor. The electoral system of single-member districts and the governmental structures of federalism and separation of powers militate against

truly national political organizations. In addition, the size and heterogeneity of the United States make platform creation and issue consensus difficult and heirarchical organization dysfunctional.

> If local parties and candidates . . . cannot express the basic desires of their constituencies, then those local parties can have no hope of success. Regardless of the organization provided, you cannot give Hubert Humphrey a banjo and expect him to carry Kansas. Only a Democrat who rejects at least a part of the New Deal can carry Kansas, and only a Republican who moderates the Republican platform can carry Massachusetts.[56]

Only once every four years have the major American political parties even seemed to become national in organization and orientation. As Odegard notes, sectional and factional differences become submerged behind a candidate, not a party, and it is only "around the President, first as candidate and later as Chief Executive, that our major parties achieve any substantial degree of unity."[57] Even then, however, it is not clear how closely attuned to current issues and candidates the public is. Stokes and Miller state that the party vote is so "extraordinarily stable" that it "raises suspicion as to whether the country is responding to the parties' current legislative actions when it votes its party loyalties."[58]

The literature on the lack of party cohesion in Congress, the weakness of partisan controls within Congress and between the Capitol and the White House and the implications for efficient action or responsive policy making is so widely known and voluminous that its existence here will be simply acknowledged. Of more value, perhaps, is a brief look at party strength and

structure in other nations, the purpose being to indicate further the difficulties American parties face in functioning as agenda-setters.

As Epstein notes, "different incentives in different systems importantly affect the way the structuring [of political activities] occurs."[59] Thus, a voter in a parliamentary system must vote for the local party candidate if he wishes a certain prime minister. In a system of separation of powers, a presidential or gubernatorial candidate can be elected without a legislative victory for his party.

Further, the two systems seem to provide distinctly different nominating environments. Hugo Heclo notes that a Briton's selection as prime minister climaxes a long political apprenticeship under established masters, while the selection of U.S. presidential candidates is made through an open and public clash of competing political entrepeneurs.[60]

Another comparison worth noting is the makeup of delegates to national conventions in Canada and the United States.

> The basic difference between delegate-apportionment formulas in Canada and the United States is that the Canadian formulas provide direct representation for public officials, party officials, constituency organizations, and interests that might otherwise be underrepresented in these three categories. On the other hand, American formulas provide direct representation for the state delegations alone.[61]

The result is the national party and national officeholders are much stronger in Canada than in the United States.[62]

Conversely, the French experience provides a possible

insight into the impact of a nominating process almost without partisan involvement. "Popular election of a president without an institutionalized nominating process leads to unpredictable and, in a sense, random intervention by the mass media, public opinion polls, and small groups of amateurs who are all too likely to start something they can't finish."[63]

This critique is especially interesting in light of evidence that American parties have only a minor role in the presidential nominating process. Two factors are involved. First, "rarely are the primaries instrumental in developing candidates who go on to win the nomination." Usually a consensus candidate, "whom the press, the polls and the party leaders recognize as the unofficial nominee before the first primaries," is found.[64] Second, the increasing number of primaries -- which, it was noted earlier, are weak as partisan influences -- also enlarges the posibility that a consensus candidate will appear before the convention delegates are chosen. Thus, one of the most obvious of partisan activities, choosing a presidential candidate by delegate vote, is in most cases an empty formality. "No matter who attends these conventions and how they go about making up their minds, the results would be very much the same." This situation occurred in all but seven "nonconsensual" nominations between 1936 and 1976.[65]

To this point in this paper, the impact of news media and political parties on public participation and knowledge have been discussed separately. This information now can be utilized to

outline the relationships between the two in the political arena and to assess their comparative strengths concerning agenda-setting and the informing function. The media and the parties began to alter their relationship dramatically in the 1950s, when television came to "rob the party of one of its basic functions -- the organization and management of campaigns. Television became, almost overnight, the principal channel of communication between the candidate and the voter."[66] A fundamental alteration occurred. Political advertisements on television did not use party organizers to stage campaign rallies and torch-light parades but advertising copy writers, media time buyers and other non-political experts.

> Candidate-marketing firms sprang up and began to crowd the traditional party organizations out of campaign management. And professional fund-raisers appeared also, to challenge the role of the party as an organization for campaign financing. They discovered that contributors would rather give to a candidate than to a party anyway.[67]

Looking from a different perspective, Stimson Bullitt referred to the same phenomenon in To Be a Politician:

> With mass media which use a common language that everyone can read, people no longer need party workers to advise them how to vote. When a citizen can see and hear the candidate on a screen at home, and read news, written by the best journalists from a variety of points of view, about the candidate's public and private life, he does not heed what is told him by the precinct worker on the block. The media have done to the campaign system what the invention of accurate artillery did to the feudal kingdom -- destroyed the barons and shifted their power to the masses and the prince.[68]

Schattschneider and Stokes state explicitly what Bullitt infers: the influence -- if not the very existence, in a practical sense -- of parties is dependent upon public acceptance of their

viability.[69] The rise of the broadcast media and the re-emergence of primaries, also in the 1950s, altered the scope and nature of the political battle.

> Television, now the principal means of nationwide communication, tended to dramatize and nationalize the previously parochial skirmishes of the primaries; with suspense, conflict, and visual appeal, the primary campaigns were an ideal subject for the medium. . . . Presidential candidates began to look with greater favor on the primaries as a means of gaining national exposure and demonstrating their attractiveness to voters. The leaders of state party organizations -- wheezing and toothless dragons compared to the robust machine bosses of an earlier day-- found it increasingly difficult to stop them.[70]

The selection of presidential candidates is determined to a great degree by mass popularity as measured by public opinion polls. As a result, a candidate without media exposure has no chance to become president.[71]

Some students and critics of the media -- those who see tremendous power being wielded by anelected and unresponsive broadcast barons -- discuss this historical progression as though political power were wrenched from the parties in an unequal and unfair battle. That probably was not the case. The fact is that the Democratic and Republican parties were not robust organizations in the 1950s when television became the major medium of communications.[72] Further, the parties may not have had a substantial measure of political influence to lose. "After all, there has never been any hard evidence to demonstrate that large numbers of votes were won by the efforts of canvassers to convert the reluctant."[73] Finally, party adherence declined as class and

ethnicity waned in influence. Envisioning an epic struggle between media and party thus seems an oversimplification.[74]

Whether or not the coup was bloodless, it did occur. Many of the implications are obvious. Some are subtle.

It is widely recognized, for example, that television has caused the party, as the middleman in political communication, largely to be bypassed. As David Broder notes, "the parties developed, in part, to fill in the gap between the citizen in his home and the official in his office, and to provide the audiences for the campaigning aspirants. Now, through television, the candidates and the officials can come directly into the home."[75] The possible implications of this are less obvious than the observable fact.

Members of the press and leaders of the parties are different individuals with different responsibilities and goals. Journalists seek out conflict and present both sides -- or they are expected to. Politicians seek to hide conflict or they take one side of an issue. The first attempts to provide a fair and balanced picture. The second seeks to win converts. As the political debate shifts from the arena managed by the parties to the one controlled in large part by the media, the character and substance of the debate would be expected to change. Some observers can see benefits in such a shift; others despair.

The commentary on French nominations cited earlier suggested one possible abberation. David Rosenbloom, a former aide of Boston

Mayor Kevin White, has suggested another. The Byzantine nature of Boston politics and media have been the source of many studies,[76] and the anecdotal portions of the Rosenbloom article are not surprising. His generalizations, however, are unusual: "Press institutions will oppose strong, continuing political organizations because they are a threat to the news organizations' central position in the political system."[77] As a corollary, he states that parties, candidates and officials cannot rely on the independent press to communicate the material and viewpoints the politicians wish to provide the public in the manner the politicians desire. The only guarantee against media alteration of the tone or nature of the message, he says, is for the parties to build "continuous access to their voters" by creating strong organizations.[78] This argument also is found in Kaminsky's study of French nominating practices:

> In addition to the exhibition of candidates under conditions set by the media, it is essential that candidates also be able to present for mass exposure any image of themselves they may want to create. [author's italics] That is the only way to prevent the mass media, the public opinion polls, and possibly the government from determining a candidate's image for him.[79]

The implications of this position are profound, as the conduct of the 1972 Nixon re-election campaign indicates.

It does seem to be the case, however, that the parties have little or no effect on the public agenda. Although the data are not unequivocal, it is possible to "infer that parties have only a limited influence over what issues become real for the public."[80] Further, "the nominating process has become more plebiscitary in

nature" and, as a result, "the media have taken on a central role" in candidate selection, also.[81] It is before the formal nominating process begins, before party activity has been stimulated, that "the press's chance to affect nominating outcomes is at its peak."[82]

Most of this discussion has not utilized the concept of critical elections. This is because the data on critical elections have not directly related party and media functions to increased public awareness and weakened stability. Still, it is likely that another critical election must occur before any substantial agenda-setting function is found. The increased public activity during critical elections would correlate with expected findings of much greater public attention to the news media and provide evidence of increased agenda-setting by the media. As earlier suggested, findings of substantial agenda-setting by the media during non-critical periods is unexpected.

However, it is open to question whether another critical election -- as the type has been identified -- will occur. Until recently, realignments have recurred "with rather remarkable regularity approximately once a generation, or every thirty to thirty-eight years."[83] The time for such a realignment has passed, and the functions of political institutions have altered substantially since 1932. "The long-term trends are surely irreversible; the old-fashioned closed political system is not going to be re-established, old-style bosses restored to power, media campaigning outlawed, or the levels of affluence and education that make for independent

politics reduced."[84] Perhaps partly because of these factors, the realignment cycle may have changed. This greatly disturbs some observers: "The drift has gone on so long now that we must, if we are realistic, admit there is a possibility that our political system cannot generate the energy needed for a party realignment."[85] Put another way, the decline of party loyalties, "one of the most profound changes in postwar American politics,"[86] may have so weakened public awareness of parties as political actors that realignment as it has been identified will not recur.

The data reviewed in this paper indicate that, although the effects of the news media on public knowledge and activity occur primarily among communicators of political actives and that the media are one of many influences on that stratum, the news media do perform long-term issue-initiating and informing functions that political parties do not, and cannot be expected to, perform. It also has been indicated that American parties do not and perhaps cannot in the existing system strongly or directly influence public activity or knowledge except in the very formal sense of having a label that candidates use. Further, it was noted that definitions of party tend not to include information-providing or agenda-setting as a function.

Whether this is normatively good, it is empirically accurate. In the American system, the parties are not the basic structure or actor in any institution that can perform an agenda-setting function. Whereas in a parliamentary system the parties provide the government,

in a system of separation of powers the president generally initiates institutional policy debate and members of the legislature are not beholden to their party. When candidates are nominated by primary, the party simply provides an arena; when nominated by convention, the conflict still is between candidates, and delegates are most often chosen on a basis of candidate preference. Only while a convention creates a platform does the party hold any claim to being an agenda-setting institution.

Neither political party is active throughout the nation. In fact, many localities have no party organization of any nature. Focusing agenda-setting in the parties and seeking responsiveness through electoral activity is putting a strain on the American party that it seems unable to accept.

It would seem preferable, therefore, to acknowledge in empirical democratic theory that political parties play a minimal role in informing the public and establishing the issue debate and to recognize the substantial and substantive role played in these areas by the news media.

This has not occurred, however. The Committee on Political Parties of the American Political Science Association, for example, noted in "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,"

> A chance that the electorate will turn its back upon the two parties is by no means academic. As a matter of fact, this development has already occurred in considerable part, and it is still going on. Present conditions are a great incentive for the voters to dispose of the parties as intermediaries between themselves and the government. . . . The mass of voters sees itself as the President's or his opponent's direct electoral support.[87]

The committee's response to this acknowledged state of affairs was not to call for a rewriting of the models of political activity in the United States but to urge systemic changes to force reality to reflect bad theory. The committee's position remains widely accepted today among political scientists.

Among communications researchers, studies all too often have utilized classrooms as laboratories and have not generally attempted to refine empirical political theory on the basis of their findings.

As a tentative step toward reaching a more accurate, and therefore more useful, model of political activity, a construct utilizing the Cobb-Elder concept of agenda-building will be attempted.

In this model, the functions of political parties are largely those the data suggest they, in fact, are. The parties provide a mechanism for determining who the governmental actors will be by operating primaries and conventions in which candidates compete as entrepeneurs. The party label provides an affective cue for both actives (a likely way to find like-minded citizens) and voters (an indication of the candidate's issue stances). The constitutional structure, size and heterogeneity of the nation are practical limitations to increased party functions, and unless that environment is changed the parties cannot be expected to take on more substantive duties in the political arena. In the Cobb-Elder terminology, the political parties provide a mechanism to facilitate the operation of the institutional agenda.

The systemic agenda, on the other hand, operates largely outside the partisan machinery. The 10 percent of the public considered the political actives use a number of institutions, a primary one being the mass media, to initiate and carry on substantive debate. The mass media perform an active function in this agenda by providing information and analysis which can be utilized by the political actives. Candidates and governmental officials seek out the press so their positions might be disseminated to the public. Information about governmental activity is provided to the public largely by the news media.

This preliminary attempt in the direction of a more useful, more accurate empirical model recognizes the historical changes in the functioning of the American political system. Research grounded in the construct suggested here should provide worthwhile additions to empirical theory and assuage some of the concerns expressed by thoughtful critics of the American party system.

ENDNOTES

1. Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "The Politics of Agenda-Building: An Alternative for Modern Democratic Theory," Journal of Politics, 33 (November 1971), 894.

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5. Cobb and Elder, op cit., p. 897.

6. Ibid., p. 906.

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9. Donald E. Stokes and Warren E. Miller, "Party Government and the Salience of Congress," Public Opinion Quarterly, 26 (1962), 531.

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15. Ranney, "Concept," op. cit., 149-150.

16. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 319-320.

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21. Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang, "The Mass Media and Voting," in Burdick and Brodbeck, op. cit., 217-35.

22. Jeane Kirkpatrick, The New Presidential Elite (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1976), for example, asks one media question in a 176-item questionnaire to national political convention delegates.

23. Angus Campbell, "Has Television Reshaped POlitics?" Columbia Journalism Review, I (Fall 1962) 12.

24. John P. Robinson, "The Press and the Voter," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 427 (September 1976) 95-103. See Also Dan Nimmo, Political Persuaders (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), and Thomas Patterson and Robert D. McClure, The Unseeing Eye (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976).

25. Campbell, op. cit., 10-11.

26. Ibid., 12.

27. Ibid., 13.

28. Nimmo, op. cit., 168.

29. See Hampden H. Smith, "Local Policy-Making, Participation and Mass Media: An Hypothesis of Salience," unpublished, University of Virginia, December 1976.

30. Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang, Politics and Television (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 16.

31. Ibid. See also McClure and Patterson, op. cit., Joseph Klapper, Effects of Mass Communication (New York: Free Press, 1961), Sidney Kraus, ed., Great Debates (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1962).

32. V.O. Key Jr., Public Opinion and American Democracy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 357.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid. See Chapter 8 for political stratification model.

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47. Robinson, Annals, op. cit., 99.

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69. See Donald E. Stokes, "Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces," in William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, eds., American Party Systems (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 182-202, and Schattschneider, op. cit., 2-4.

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